

SHERMAN IN THE BELL

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science fiction short story

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Sherman was named after an army tank that rolled the dusty hills of Tunisia a hundred years before he was born. He was now confined within a tank of sorts – an air-filled, VW bug-sized diving bell that retained the basic characteristics of the first wood barrel placed in the Athens harbor in 332 B.C. Sherman wondered what sort of young Athenian had the cojones to place himself in an olive wood box under water. There must have been some enticement – perhaps treasure had spilled from a ship at dockside.

Sherman's barrel was state-of-the-art high tensile-strength 4mm plastic unit that unfolded like an upside down lotus blossom. He sat in what his handlers dubbed 'the barbers chair' – with his boots a full sixty centimeters from the frigid water - kept at bay below by the air bubble in the bell. The 360 degree view, lit by strong external lamps, was uninterrupted blue-green opal in all directions. Well, all direction other than upward – which was the dirty white underside of a planet-sized ice-shelf which stretched completely around Enceladus – a moon of Saturn. Not a lumen of sun penetrated this abyss - not so much because the sun was so far away, but because this moon's surface was as reflective as buffed metal.

The support staff knew that being suspended in liquid space devoid of detail, might compel a aquanaut to either go nuts or succumb to drowsiness. Indeed, hundreds of hours training within earthbound diving bells had prepared him for this endless horizon effect.

"Sherman, Sherman do you read?"

"Huh, oh yes. This is Sherman. I read you. No need to shout in your mike – your voice is clear enough. Lighten up on the volume please."

“How are your vital indices?”

“Vital indices good – I’m feeling fine down here.”

“Any visuals. Over.”

“Absolutely clear in every direction – other than translucent white above. Over.”

“We’re going to lower you down. When you get to fifty meters you may initiate probe releases. Do you copy?”

Sherman had risen up the ranks at a time when aquanauts came through the military. He still didn’t quite know why he’d been chosen for such a plum position – over other candidates that seemed eminently better qualified. A World Today magazine bio said it was his ‘non-threatening demeanor’ that enabled him to zip up the ranks. ‘Maybe all the other candidates were too sharp – so I got the gig by default,’ he mused. ‘When I get back to Terra, I’ll write a book titled; How to Succeed by Being a Wonk.’

For decades, people who gave a hoot about space exploration were roughly split between two camps. On the one hand there were the robotics people who believed that machinery and robots were the best means to explore space – at least for exploratory probes. The idea being; robot launches were cheaper to arrange and could travel much further for longer periods of time than anything manned. Certainly more hard science could be garnered for a lower price tag.

The ‘humans-on-board’ folks didn’t disdain robotics, but instead believed that gaining public support would be more effective with people at the helm. After all, a fisherman in Bangladesh or a hairstylist in Botswana could relate more with humans walking on a faraway planet – than with some metallic spider bristling with probes – exploring the same terrain.

Sherman was now seventy meters below the mother ship – his bell connected by an inch thick umbilical tube – through which snaked 17 sensors – including tubes vital for life support – the most essential of which was his air supply. Oxygen rich air – pumped down from the ship, was then warmed upon arrival at the bell. Concurrently, spent air was channeled back up to the mother ship to get scrubbed. No one wanted contamination from spent breath on this pristine moon – and certainly didn’t want to come back years later and find creepy-crawly things had evolved from the bacteria in Sherman’s spent breath.

Actually, there were some people, represented by the Council of Terraformers, who strongly advocated seeding planets and moons with select organisms from Earth. The idea was to begin, as soon as possible, the process of transforming an alien planet's environment – toward one which could in the future, support Terran (Earth's) flora and fauna. There was no question that some Earth-based organisms could survive in alien planets' extreme habitats. They advocated the release of organisms carefully selected to optimize the desired result; an Earth-like atmosphere and environment.

For decades, the planet Mars, and Jupiter's moon Europa were considered the leading contenders for extra planetary life in the solar system. Europa's ice-covered surface was first penetrated by the robotic probe *Pioneer* in 2026. While self-propelling itself through the water, *Pioneer* found fields of precious stones beneath the ice – though no life forms.

Since then, increased attention has been focused toward Saturn's ice covered candidate; Enceladus. Large crevasses cleaving its ice sheet had been a source of intrigue for decades – ever since they were first identified by the Cassini-Huygens fly-by probe in 2005. Excitement clicked up a notch when evidence surfaced that the lips of some of those crevasses were shown to be lined in pastel green colors. That excitement abated when a subsequent probe showed that the colors were caused by residual minerals - rather than the extra-planetary life that many had hoped for. The robotics people had spirited debates with the 'humans-on-board' folks - as to which was less of a hare-brained method to probe Enceladus. *Sherman's* vulnerable body in the bell gave proof to which side prevailed.

Because this first dive was planned to last upwards to five hours, a small click-locker on board was stocked with a modest amount of food and drink. Though there were buttons to push and a reading to take once in a while, most of *Sherman's* time was spent doing a whole lot of nothing. A timed scheduling for scientific tasks could have easily covered all the bases, but the programmers intentionally left some tasks for *Sherman* to initiate – so that he wouldn't go stark raving mad, as the result of staring out at a limitless expanse of nothing.

"Bubbles."

"*Sherman*, did you say 'bubbles?' please use procedure – and articulate, over."

"Yes, pardon me. There are bubbles coming up from below the bell – well not directly below, but a few wispy trails are coming up – in other directions. Over."

“Are they your bubbles – expelled from your craft? Over.”

“No, these are definitely from below the craft. Over.”

“Please articulate further. How concentrated? Captain Miller says to get your spoon arm over there to capture the bubbles for analysis. Over.”

“Nothing much now – they seem to have tapered.... Oh here we go, in the northwest quadrant a few wispy – you have to understand, it’s not like a scuba diver’s cascade of bubbles, these are just tiny wisps, tiny strings of small.... Oh my gosh, there’s a couple of big ones, about the size of baseballs.”

“Get your spoon arm over there. We’d like to know whether they’re organic, inert or what. Over.”

“Roger that. I am positioning the spoon arm to the NW direction – though there are currently no bubbles. I will position the arm to try to catch what I can.”

“Sherman, urgent urgent!; Telstat Three has detected an earthquake – approximately three hundred meters north-northeast of our position. [some unintelligible loud voices in the background] Sherman, we’re going to have to initiate proceedings to raise the bell.”

“Affirmative, though I think I’ve caught a few bubbles in the spoon arm. Preliminary content readings are inconclusive.”

Sherman watched the numbers on the depth gauge slowly decrease from 68 meters on through the fifties, on through the forties – a slight bit of natural light returned to his world. There was also a gauge that showed horizontal movement. Lab techs dubbed it the ‘lava lamp’ because it’s eerie indicators were a world away from any of dozens of other gauges in the bell. A softly glowing purplish blob sat in an enclosed thermos-like well on top. Around it was a 2 cm wide ring lit up in yellow – which indicated the horizontal direction of the bell – along with a number that showed the craft’s speed. It was showing only the faintest of blips, indicating no horizontal movement in any direction.

The bell then dropped in an accelerating descent - as if tugged by a giant hand. For a full three seconds, Sherman recalls the feeling of being in a San Francisco elevator descending speedily. He sees the depth gauge reading mid sixties. He then hears a muffled clang, and finds his body

slammed to the top of the bell. All lights quit – then just as suddenly they’re back on again. Another glance at the depth gauge tells him his craft has risen up to the forties in an uncanny second – then silence.

‘Am I floating? No up or down sensation.’ Sherman wonders. With racing pulse, he clicks on the lamp in his hardhat and looks out the bell to see what at first appears to be a loose snake slowly cascading down from above. The umbilical cord has snapped – and is falling of its own weight – showing no signs of urgency. The emergency battery power kicks on automatically. He knows it’s a small battery unit, so he switches off everything but one exterior lamp and the control panel.

He tries the wireless two-way radio but it’s filled with static. He looks out again in time to see the splayed end of the cord falling as nonchalant as it is hushed - then suddenly realizes the weight of the cord could override any maneuverings he might try with the bell. Even in the best of times, during drills in the Nasa reservoir, the wimpy little propellers near the top were minimally effective.

“So this is how it ends?!” he says out loud. Concerns about the broken umbilical cord pulling the bell one way or another seem almost petty. Without a tether to the mother ship, his chances of being retrieved are about stone cold nil. Faint wisps of static come through the intercom. Sherman tries calling out, but it’s as if his voice has shut its signal down to nothing. He turns it off.

A reading of the depth gauge shows barely a wobble. Sherman wonders if the cord might have hit bottom somewhere close by. The lava lamp starts to show a yellow light at 215 degrees with a speed of two knots. At the same time, the depth gauge shows a slight descent. Looking out at 215 degrees with his headlamp, still near full lumens, he sees the umbilical cord stretched straight away from the bell, fading to infinity. The bell has taken on a gradual tilt, and holding. Sherman takes a wax pen and jots down depth and directional movements on the inside of the bell. The calculations indicate a lazy downward-sloping arc. He allows himself the faint hope that maybe the mother ship has somehow, miraculously, grabbed hold of the cord and is towing him to...

“...to where? If I’m being retrieved, they should haul my sorry buns straight up – not drag me like a kids toy through this frigid world – the largest damn ocean in the solar system – and not even any mermaids.” He almost snickers, but the humor dissipates.

He figures that, even without the slightest whimper of hope, he would do himself well to go through a routine checklist. He notes the gauges and writes; Air quality 78%. Temperature in craft: 21C. Body Temperature; normal. Water Temperature; 3C.

Every water temperature reading since the first robotic probes on Enceladus have all read between zero and 1 degree C , so he finds it odd that water temp is up to 6 degrees. ‘How could it be?’ he wonders out loud. His voice sounds eerily like the character in an ancient movie he saw on board; featuring an ‘inspector Clouseau.’ He repeats the phrase a few times with an affected French accent.

Noise. Dragging. Sherman gets his head knocked to the wall, then looks down to see sand directly below. The bell is tipped and stuck at a 45 degree angle and quickly fills nearly full with water – while a mass of bubbles glugs out – causing the whole bell to shudder. Its not freezing Rocky Mountain stream temperature he would have expected. No, this was country pond in summer temperature. Sherman’s head wedges up in the only small air cavity left at the top of the bell.

‘Here we go,’ he thinks, ‘this can’t last more than a few minutes. What a way to go. What’s this? Water lapping against the side?’

Knowing there’s nothing else to lose, Sherman makes one forced lunge down - down to the bottom lip of bell. Scrambling with all his strength, he slides under the perimeter and up out of the water. An impulsive breath affords a lungful of – breathable air! Certainly not the lovely air along the shores of the James River where he grew up, but air with a chemical aftertaste. He recalls his martial arts instructor at Annapolis barking, “whatever don’t kill you – makes you stronger.” Well, this dank air didn’t appear to be lethal.

He turns to shine his fading head lamp at the beached bell, then flops down on wet sand. He feels himself drifting off to a well-earned snooze, then realizes that maybe he should stay active. Still lying prone, he swivels his head in the sand and the lamp catches what seems to be the rocky arch of an entry to a cavern.

He briefly entertains the thought of diving back under the half submerged bell to salvage the few snacks in the clip drawer – but decides doing that would take too much energy and, with only this foul air to breathe, he could expire quicker than the flickering control panel lights within the diving bell.

He notices a faint glow within the cavern and trudges toward it. Walking is pretty much unhindered, mostly stretches of soft sand, sloping gently upwards, with a few rocks peppered here and there. He sweeps the headlamp upward but the weak light can't penetrate far enough to find purchase on a ceiling. A couple times he shouts and gets a long delayed echo – indicating a truly gargantuan space. As he gets closer to the glow within the bowels of the cavern, the heat increases. He sheds clothing and lets things drop by the wayside. He begins to discern details of a molten red and gold pond set in the sand – reminding him of the best pizza he ever had. As a 16 year old in Formentor in the Mediterranean, he had somehow showed up at a fancy-pants hotel dinner hosted by an elder man dressed in white. The elegant man was the center of attention, with beautiful women hanging on his arm, giggling and beaming at his every utterance. The hotel's concierge came to boot the uninvited teenager out on his heel, but the man in white took notice and intervened on Sherman's behalf.

“Anyone who can find this hidden party at this, the most secluded hotel in the Balearics, should be commended. The boy is my invited guest,” he said with a magnanimous sweep of his arm. The shipping magnate then assigned one of his gorgeous mistresses to attend to me, and she obliged – well above and beyond the call of duty. Indeed, she erotically attended to desires I didn't even know I had - until the wee hours. The pizza at the party that night was like the softly glowing warm ruby pond, with gold lattice bubbling playfully through it.

His boot squishes on something soft, and he suddenly realizes it's one of a thousand soft things entirely rimming the molten pool. Like foot-tall columnar sponges, they all have faintly glowing rose-colored spots dangling out on thin black stalks. They appear to be various shades of blue and pink, though the fading headlamp helps little, in discerning colors. Sherman picks one up and it recoils to half its size, while its rose spots fade to black. He tosses it underhand to the middle of the ruby pool – it lets off a cloud of smoke as it fricassees noisily at the surface. Concurrently, all the mottled thingies jiggle nervously, while creeping away from the intruder. Sherman expires.

Sherman wakes, as if from a long pleasant sleep. He turns to his side on the lovely white mattress. He reaches out to grab a glass of juice on the ornate table alongside – ‘hmmm, chilled orange juice - nothing could be finer,’ he whispers.

He slowly sits up and looks around. All is blackness except the entrancing ruby and gold pool - stretched out alongside – ‘déjà vu to the tenth degree,’ he smiles. No mottled things in sight, only clean sand to the pool's edge. The air is lovely as he leans over to get a better look at a bronze plaque set in a rock by the bed – lit by a small bulb: “Shermantown, the first human settlement on

Enceladus – discovered by Sherman T. Slavonic, 2072” Below, in smaller letters, is written; “This plaque dedicated on this lovely day; July 11, 2097.”

A hundred meters away in all directions, thousands of candles light up and delightful applause bathes the sweet air.

- end -

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